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ABSTRACT

Dissatisfaction with public education has caused many parents to seek schooling alternatives or to demand a stronger voice in choosing their children's public schools. This paper presents findings of a study that examined attitudes toward school choice held by administrators, teachers, and parents. A survey of a total of 215 elementary school administrators, teachers, and parents in central Tennessee elicited 100 responses. Pearson's correlation, multiple regression, and chi-square statistical procedures were used to analyze the data. Parents reported that they wanted school choice, but did not want to pay for choice for all parents and students, viewing choice as an individual decision. Respondents opposed private-school vouchers at the public's expense, unless the schools had unrestricted enrollment and were subject to the same federal regulations as public schools. More parents than educators favored choice, saying that it would increase parental involvement. Educators were dubious. Both educators and parents may favor choice, but not at the expense of losing other educational programs. It is critical that choice plans not be implemented until structural and functional purposes of choice are clearly understood. Nine tables are included. Contains seven references. (LMI)

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ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS, AND PARENTS RESPOND TO SOME SCHOOL CHOICE ISSUES

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Introduction

Despite the sweeping changes ushered in by the educational reforms of the 80s, the reforms did very little to change parents' negative perception of public schools. In fact, recent data indicate that a large percentage of parents continue to be dissatisfied with school results. As it was observed throughout the 80s, dissatisfaction with low achievement scores, poor curriculum and instruction, and school safety continue to plague parents (Futrell, 1989; Maeorff, 1989; Walberg & Niemiec, 1994).

This perpetual dissatisfaction has partially influenced many parents to either seek schooling alternatives or demand to have a strong voice in what school their child attends. Parental dissatisfaction is the primary reason why the concept of school choice has become more pronounced and debatable in the 90s than in the 80s. In fact, school choice support grew 6% from what it was in 1987 (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1991). The notion that parents have the right to decide where their child attends school has been applauded by some proponents, while discouraged by opponents. School choice has become one of the most critical and controversial issues facing public schools (Brandt, 1991; Ellison, 1991; Pearson, 1989).

Purpose of the Study

In light of the school choice controversy, the primary purpose of the study was to assess school choice perceptions among some administrators, teachers, and parents. The secondary purpose was to determine significant differences between the three groups. The study also examined school choice decisions in relationship to transportation, parental involvement, and financial support.

Six questions guided the study:

1. Do administrators, teachers, and parents favor school choice?
2. If so, why is parental school choice favored?
3. What are some positive and negative outcomes with school choice?
4. Are parents satisfied with the public school that child attends?
5. Are respondents willing to provide transportation for school choice, and are they willing to fund it?
6. Should parents be given private school choices?

Three hypothesis were proposed: (1) Parents are more likely to be in favor of school choice than administrators and teachers; therefore, a significant difference between these groups will exist; (2) School choice decisions are primarily based on student achievement reasons than school improvement, and (3) Transportation cost is related to school choice decisions.

Methodology

Employing literature findings of school-choice issues, a survey instrument with closed-end responses was designed to collect data from administrators, teachers, and parents. The instrument

consisted of three scales. The first scale included eight checklist of "yes" and "no" statements that assessed school choice attitudes of parent choice, transportation, funding, and private schooling. The second scale consisted of four-item statements that measured school-choice outcomes, and parent satisfaction with current schooling. The last scale consisted of three checklist of "yes" and "no" statements that assessed parental involvement and support with school choice plans.

A total of 215 surveys were sent to some elementary administrators, teachers, and parents in Middle Tennessee. Of the number surveyed, 100 returned the questionnaire.

Three statistical procedures were employed to analyze the data. Pearson Correlation examined school choice attitudes in relationship to funding, transportation, and educational outcomes. Multiple regression procedures were conducted to test the effects of transportation, private schooling, and voucher attitudes on school choice and public school satisfaction. Chi-square statistical procedures were conducted to test significant school choice differences between administrators, teachers, and parents. The level of significance was set at .05.

Data Result

As Table 1 shows, the respondents primarily favored school choice and funding the total cost of education with vouchers. Surprisingly, while the respondents favored school choice, they did not favor providing free transportation, nor did they favor increasing taxes to fund transportation. It was also noteworthy to

find that very few respondents favored funding private schooling. Another important issue not shown in Table 1 is the cost of free transportation at the risk of eliminating some educational programs. Seventy-five percent of the respondents felt free transportation cost would adversely affect other educational programs.

When these same school choice issues were examined with administrators, teachers, and parents, the percentage values varied. It can be observed in Table 2 that more parents (49%) than administrators (12%) favored school choice. Not only did some administrators oppose school choice, but all the administrators opposed public funds for private schooling. Almost half (N=15) of the parents favored increasing taxes to fund free transportation.

Table 1
Attitudes With Some School Choice and Issues

	Yes		No	
Issue	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
School Choice	91	91	9	9
Private School Choice	5	5	95	5
Free Transportation	17	17	83	83
Funding Transportation	22	22	78	78
Voucher Cost	57	57	43	43

Table 2

Administrators, Teachers, and Parents' Favorable Attitudes Toward School Choice and Issues

Respondent	School Choice	Private Schooling	Free Transport	Funding Transport	Voucher Cost
Admin.	.12	0	.01	.01	.13
Teachers	.30	.02	.01	.03	.26
Parents	.49	.03	.15	.18	.31

Note. Values are percentages.

To ascertain if respondents understood some issues surrounding school choice, the respondents were asked about possible outcomes with school choice. Table 3 shows respondents saw school choice improving parental involvement and schools. However, while 73% of the respondents said choice would improve some schools, they also felt choice would hurt other schools. It was interesting to find while some administrators opposed school choice, they saw some improvements with choice.

Another critical issue with choice is whether or not choice can effectuate student achievement. Overall, the respondents said student achievement would increase with choice. Again, while some administrators previously opposed choice, of the administrator group, 47% (N=7) said achievement would increase with choice. Fifty-three percent (N=8) from this group said no achievement effect would occur with choice. Similar views were shared by the teacher group. Of course, parents' overwhelming support for choice also reflected achievement outcome. Of the parent group, 82% (N=41) said achievement would result with choice, while 18% (N=9) saw no effects.

Can school choice influence school/community relations? Overall, 43% of the respondents said choice would have no effects on school/community relations. An unexpected finding was the large percentage of the teachers who favored choice said choice would hurt school/community relations (58%, N=18). Perhaps the teachers feel choice will put students and teachers farther away from them, if parents do not select neighborhood schools.

Knowing that school choice means accepting some changes, the respondents (42%) were not in favor of closing community schools who lose students to other school choice plans. A large percentage of parents (31%) were not in favor of closing these declining schools. This finding with parents strongly suggested that parents also want options to return to unselected schools, if choice schools don't work. On the other hand, if school choice is implemented, 53% of the respondents favored supporting tax increases for selected schools.

Another pronounced finding was when respondents were asked if parents had free transportation, would they select another school other than the one their child attends. While all the administrators (15%) and most teachers (34%) perceived parents to be happy with the attended school, 10% of the parents did not agree. They felt that parents were more likely to change their child's school with school choice.

Table 3
Percentages of Responses to Educational Outcomes with School Choice

School Choice Outcome	N	%
Increased Parent involvement	61	61
Improve schools	23	23
Improve/ Hurt	73	73
Increase student achievement	63	63
No effect on achievement	35	35
Improve school/ community relations	21	21
No effect on school/ community relations	43	43

Significant School Choice Differences:

Chi-square statistical procedures were conducted to examine school choice differences between the groups. No significant school choice differences were found between administrators and teachers. However, greater differences were found between administrators and parents, as well as between teachers and parents.

School Choice Issues with Administrators and Parents

It can be observed from Table 4 that most of the differences between administrators and parents were found with whether or not parents should have school choice ($p < .01$). The two groups also differed significantly with funding school choice. Most administrators were opposed to a tax increase for free transportation ($p < .02$). The two groups did not differ significantly on regulatory policies for private schools with public funds, free transportation, and voucher coverage ($p > .05$).

Other significant school choice differences were also observed between the two groups. Administrators were more dubious than parents about parental involvement with choice. As expected, more parents significantly differed with administrators that parents are happy with the school the child attends, and they would change their child's school ($p < .05$).

School Choice Issues with Teachers and Parents

When these school choice issues were examined with teachers and parents, similar findings were observed. Table 5 clearly shows more significant choice differences existed between teachers and parents than previously observed with administrators. As observed with administrators, more teachers than parents opposed parents choosing a public school ($p < .02$). Teachers and parents largely disagreed about providing free transportation and funding transportation with tax increases to support choice. Significantly, the two groups differed with free transportation for

school choice ($p < .002$). To teachers, free transportation was at the expense of eliminating other educational programs ($p < .02$). Moreover, more parents than teachers favored a tax increase to support choice ($p < .004$). However, all three groups agreed that if choice plans are adopted, vouchers should cover all educational expenses.

Other school choice differences between teachers and parents existed with funding private schools with unrestricted student enrollment ($p < .002$). As previously observed with administrators, parents differed significantly from teachers that parents are happy with the school the child attends, and they would change their child's school ($p < .01$). However, both teachers and parents did not differ significantly as to whether or not parental involvement would increase with choice. In fact, 66% of the parent group said parents would be more involved with choice, while 63% of the teacher group agreed.

Table 4
School Choice Differences Between Administrators and Parents

	School Choice	Private Schooling	Free Transport	Funding Transport	Voucher Cost
N=65					
X^2	6.47	.94	3.39	4.80	3.21
(*df*)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
p =	.010*	.331	.062	.026*	.069

Significant

Table 5
School Choice Differences Between Teachers and Parents

	School Choice	Private Schooling	Free Transport	Funding Transport	Voucher Cost
N=85					
X^2	4.74	.00	9.93	8.23	1.41
(*df*)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
p =	.027*	.910	.002*	.004*	.236

Significant

Correlation Results with School Choice Issues

School choice attitudes were examined in relationship to some choice issues with transportation, funding, private schooling, and vouchers. Favorable and unfavorable attitudes about parents' right to choose school showed very little correlation with the school choice issues. However, with the transportation issue, the data revealed support for free transportation was positively, moderately related to tax increases (r = .88). To have school choice, the respondents were more likely to favor tax increases to fund transportation. The respondents were also more likely to support tax increases for choice schools with growing enrollments, if those community schools with low enrollments were closed (r = .76). Support for tax increases was also evident from the positive

relationship between tax increases for choice school with growing enrollments and increased parental involvement (r = .77). Perhaps such findings strongly suggest that when parents are involved in the educational process, they understand what resources are needed to adequately educate children. Therefore, the more parents are involved in the educational process, the more likely they are to support tax increases for quality schooling.

The study also examined school choice attitudes in relationship to expected choice outcomes. The unfavorable attitude for free transportation to choice schools was positively, moderately related to realizing how choice schools will affect schools (r = .74). That is, free transportation with choice can improve some schools, while hurting others. School choice effects also showed a positive relationship with the unfavorable attitude with tax increases for free transportation (r = .74), closing schools (r = .70), and school/community relations (r = .76). The respondents were not willing to fund non-choice schools.

Surprisingly, achievement as a school choice outcome had small correlation values with transportation, funding, and parent involvement. On the other hand, parents' happiness with the school child attends and decision to change schools showed a positive and moderate relationship with voucher regulations for private schools (r = .76). Public school parents are more likely to stay with the public school, if private schools receiving vouchers are not expected to follow the same regulations mandated for public schools.

Multiple Regression Results

School Choice and Issues

Further examination of the data with multiple regression was conducted with school choice, the issues, school happiness, parent involvement, and school choice outcomes. The results showed that transportation, private schooling, and voucher explained the effects on school choice attitudes. It can be observed in Table 6 that 59% of the variance in choice accounted for the variance in transportation, private schooling, and voucher issues. Multiple R indicated a strong relationship between choice and these choice issues (.77). Therefore, responses to school choice issues had a strong effect on whether or not respondents favored school choice. This finding strongly suggested that the issues surrounding choice are extremely important. Surprisingly, eliminating educational programs for free transportation had the greatest beta effect (1.16) on choice than free transportation (.31).

It was also evident from the data in Table 7 that favoring choice could hardly predict transportation and private schooling attitudes. Fourteen percent of the variance in the issues could only be explained by choice. However, when other choice issues were examined to predict responses to free transportation, the results were astounding. Eighty-two percent of the variance in free transportation was explained by choice issues related to eliminating programs, tax increases for transportation, private schooling, and vouchers. The correlation between these variable was .91, and the greatest beta effect on free transportation was

tax increases for transportation (.95).

Parent Involvement

Hardly any variability in choice could be explained by parent involvement (10%) and parent happiness (1%). (See Table 8). Yet, choice issues did predict parent involvement responses. Fifty-one percent of the variance of parent involvement was due to responses with choice issues. Parent involvement was strongly associated with these choice issues ($r = .72$). The effect of school choice outcomes on parent involvement was also examined. Similarly, 39% of the variance in parent involvement was explained by choice outcomes. The greatest beta effects on parental involvement were student achievement (.41) and school/community relations (.41). For student achievement and school/community relations, parents are more likely to increase their involvement. An unexpected finding was parents' happiness with the attended school or unhappiness to change schools hardly explained the variance in parent involvement ($R^2 = .14$).

School Choice Outcomes

When school choice was examined with possible outcomes, only 17% of the variance in school choice responses was due to school choice outcomes related to improvement, achievement, and school/community relations. (See Table 8). Perhaps favoring choice is perceived more as a parental right than as an educational product.

On the other hand, when effects of choice issues were examined with choice outcomes, the results differed as observed in Table 9. For example, 73% of the variance in school improvement was explained by the variance in choice issues related transportation, private schooling, tax increases, and vouchers. Free transportation had the greatest beta effect on school improvement (.58). Similarly, 53% of the variance in school/community relations could be explained by these choice issues. The greatest beta effect was tax increases for transportation (.34). Perhaps school/community relations could be adversely affected, if taxes are increased to provide transportation for choice schools. As a result, when parents have access to free transportation for any school, they are more likely to feel free to select distant schools. Thus, it becomes difficult to build school and family relations outside the community.

An unexpected finding was only 34% of the variance in achievement outcome was due to choice issues. Frequently, school choice issues with transportation and vouchers are debated in terms of strong emotional beliefs, rather than possible outcomes for students. This data finding strongly suggests the choice proponents in this study do not associate the issues with expected achievement outcomes with choice.

School Happiness/Change

Whether or not parents were happy with school or would change was not due to favoring choice. Conversely, however, responses to choice issues were strong predictors of whether or not parents were

happy with the school their child attends, or if they would change with choice. As previously observed, choice issues were strong predictors with responses. Thus, seventy-four percent of the variance in happiness was explained by the variance in the choice issues related to transportation, private schooling, and vouchers. Voucher regulations for private schools had the greatest impact on happy responses (.74). In fact, it was interesting to find that happiness and choice responses could predict voucher regulatory attitudes (R^2 = .58). The happier parents are with the school the child attends, the more likely they are to favor regulatory policies for private schools receiving vouchers. The respondents wanted private schools with vouchers to comply to the same government policies imposed on public schools. A moderate correlation was found with this choice issue and parents' satisfaction with the school the child attends (r = .76). Perhaps private schooling may not be the primary choice for parents whose children attend public schools. What is more important for parents is to have input with making decisions about their child's education. To some degree, the happier parents are with public schools, the likelihood they favor vouchers to pay the total cost for educating students (R^2 = .26).

Happy and school choice respondents were more likely to associate choice with improved student achievement. Choice and happiness were moderate predictors of student achievement responses (R^2 = .22). Choice had the greatest beta effect (.32) on achievement. If parents had choice, are they more likely to

become involved in the school? As previously stated with parent involvement, happiness and choice were also moderate predictors of parent involvement. Twenty-six percent of the variance in parent involvement was due to happiness and choice. The more parents have choice and are happy with the school their child attends, the more likely for parent participation in the school. As expected, the greatest beta effect on parent involvement was happiness (.41).

Table 6
Some Multiple Regression Results of Predictors of School Choice Responses

Predictor	**School Choice**
Choice Issues	.59
Parent Involvement	.10
School Choice Outcomes	.17

N=100

Table 7
Some Multiple Regression Results of Predictors of School Choice Issues

Predictor	Free Transport	Vouchers	Voucher Regulate	Program Cuts
Choice Happy	.13	.26	.58	.57
Choice	.00			.22
Happy				.37
Issues	.82		.74	

N=100

Table 8
Some Multiple Regression Results of Predictors of School Choice, Parent Involvement and Happiness Responses

Predictor	School Choice	Parent Involvement	Happy
Choice			.01
Issues	.59	.52	.74
Parent Involvement	.10		
Choice Outcomes	.17	.39	

N=100

Table 9
Some Multiple Regression Results of Predictors of School Choice Outcomes

Predictor	School Improve	Student Achieve	School/Community Relations
Choice Issues	.73	.34	.53
Parent Involvement	.23		
Choice Happy	.08	.22	.12

N=100

Conclusions

In a cursory review of the school choice literature, it is evident that educators and parents strongly disagree about school choice and the issues surrounding choice. Some findings from this study supported this ongoing choice debate. However, some different conclusions were drawn from the study.

Based on the findings from this study, school choice is viewed as a parental right. Yet, this right has restricted parameters. That is, parents want choice, but they do not want the extended burdens of paying for it for all parents and students. As choice opponents have raised equity concerns with choice, there is some indication from the responses that parents view choice as an individual choice. Parents do not see themselves representing an interest group for choice. Thus, if parents select quality schools

that are remotely located, it is the parent's responsibility to provide transportation. The question is will choice schools be located where low-income parents have convenient access? This is frequently the question that many choice opponents have raised. The fear is that choice schools will become affluent schools for parents with financial resources.

Surprisingly, however, the respondents did not support private schools securing vouchers at public expense unless they have unrestricted enrollment criteria and are subject to the same federal regulations as public schools. It is evident that parents do not necessarily want choice and vouchers for private schooling opportunities. With choice, the parents are likely to remain with public schools. Of course, the literature reports have shown with experimental choice schools, the parents favor having the opportunity to have their children attend private and parochial schools. In fact, snapshots of the results reveal that minority and low-income students who participate in these experimental programs perform academically higher than they did in their previous classroom setting.

It was also evident from the findings that more parents than educators favored choice, it is clear that partnerships between public schools and parents need further development. The gap and conflict between school and families still exist. To some degree, educators fear parents' advocacy for choice, while parents distrust educators to make qualitative decisions about their children's education. Parenthetically, educators are frustrated that parents

won't attend school programs, and parents are frustrated with educators that their children are not learning. The findings clearly support these conclusions as parents say their involvement will increase with choice and administrators are dubious. The study concluded the parents want to be involved in the educational process.

The study also concluded that the issues surrounding choice are critical, and they cannot be isolated from choice. However, it cannot be overlooked that parents frequently want to isolate the issues from their personal beliefs about choice. Both educators and parents may favor choice, but not at the expense of losing other educational programs. Thus, it is critical that choice plans not be implemented until structural and functional purposes of choice are clearly understood. It is also evident from the findings that parents need to have some input in school decisions. It is not that parents are unhappy with public schools. They are happy when they feel included in the educational process.

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